DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 179 864 CG 014 005

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TITLE Student Reaction to a University Disaster: Initial Analyses and Recommendations.
PUB DATE 1 Sep 79
NOTE 43p.: Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (87th, New York, NY, September 1-5, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment): Anxiety: Attitudes: Behavioral Science Research: *College Students: *Emotional Response: Higher Education: Research Projects: Response Mode: *Social Behavior: *Stress Variables: *Student College Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Disasters

ABSTRACT

The University of Evansville basketball team and others associated with it were killed in an airplane crash in December, 1977. The University had to decide how to respond to the tragedy. Advice received from other universities was based upon impression rather than systematic data collection. At Evansville, interviews were held with 87 students who were asked how they behaved and how they felt about their adjustment to the loss. While random selection of the sample was only approximated, the sample was demographically representative of the full time undergraduate population. Most students reported spending the evening of the crash in groups watching television news reports, going to the chapel, and talking together in the dorms. The next day most attended the memorial service at the campus chapel. Students did seem to profit from maintenance of these natural groups and communication networks. Maintaining students on campus and offering them a wide range of memorial activities seems appropriate. Adjustment indicators suggest that students coped well, however psychosomatic reactions may have been relatively frequent but unrecognized as such. Data suggest that the relatively successful adjustment may have been due to the matching of activities (religious) with a type of student body (religious). (Author)

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STUDENT REACTION TO A UNIVERSITY DISASTER: INITIAL ANALYSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS*

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* PAPER PRESENTED AT THE MEETING OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 1, 1979.

RUNNING HEAD: UNIVERSITY DISASTER

CG 014005

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On the cold rainy evening of December 13, 1977 a DC-3 crashed on takeoff from Dress Regional Airport killing all members of the University of Evansville basketball team, the head coach, trainers, employees and several friends of the University. In virtually any setting, a tragedy of this proportion would be predicted to have far-reaching consequences.

Perhaps for a number of reasons one might suspect that consequences would be particularly serious at the University of Evansville. In comparison to many state universities the University of Evansville is relatively small with approximately 6,000 students of whom 3,000 are full-time. Because of this, one would assume that many of the students knew the players either directly or indirectly through a mutual friend. For many students one could surmise that the tragedy was probably a personal one. The basketball team had also received an unusually great amount of exposure during the Fall of 1977, since that year marked the entrance of the University into Division I basketball. This extensive coverage seemed to increase the commitment of the University community to the players and staff. However, the large number of freshmen on the team coupled with the early point in the season may be factors which would somewhat mitigate

the degree of association with the players and therefore the impact of the tragedy.

As is true with most tragedies, this one struck without warning. University personnel were suddenly confronted with the task of helping the University community and the general community deal with the tragedy. The task was made difficult because there was limited precedent for determining what should be done. Advice from Dr. Mervin Tyson and Mr. Steve Naysworth of Marshall University was most helpful and was conveyed via Dr. Frank Lahman of UE Student Counseling Service. While this advice was valuable, little systematic evidence had actually been collected to describe what transpired after the disaster or to make inferences about what a reasonable organizational response might be.

Among the actions of the University were opening the Chapel for prayer, announcing a memorial service, dismissing classes on a day by day basis, and encouraging a wide range of memorial activities. Administrative personnel were assigned to assist families of the victims. As Christmas vacation was near, classes were resumed for Thursday evening through the next Wednesday's dismissal. Attendance policies were left to the professors as were decisions on how to conduct

classes. A resource document was prepared by Lahman and Dr. Barbara Jessen. A variety of support groups were offered by faculty, staff, and student organizations. The campus moved to action even in its sadness.

This research was also conceived in sadness. It was conducted with a great deal of trepidation. Interpretation of and theorizing about the results have not been the usually exhilarating experience. The study both describes the behavior of students after hearing of the disaster and reports their opinions of their own behavior and adjustment. We report their opinions of University policy and procedure as well. We also draw upon data from student service facilities to further explicate student response and adjustment. While we recognize the limitations of our methodology, the results provide a reasonable data base for generating recommendations to other Universities faced with similar tragedy. It would be comforting to believe that such a disaster would not occur again. The history of Marshall University, Wichita State, and Evansville coupled with the even more recent experience with the DC-10 and the death of Thurmon Munson make that kind of belief untenable. This study then addresses secondary prevention efforts and understanding.

Method

It is unusual to include the emotional status of E in a method section, however this study addresses unusual circumstances. There is little doubt that our decisions about methodology were strongly influenced by our perceptions of what socially appropriate and personally sensitive procedures would be. There was some question of whether conducting such a study was at all feasible. Although a large N is always desirable, our perception was that a questionnaire study which would allow a large sample to be collected would be judged inappropriate and insensitive. Our assessment was that only personal interviews would provide an avenue for satisfying both social and social science demands. This allowed us to collect information in March, three months after the crash.

After agreeing upon a structure for the interview we obtained a list of all enrolled full-time students and randomly selected students within each grade level. We originally selected 40 students at each grade. Because of inaccurate information and a general difficulty in accessing students on our lists, a second random list was generated. Four interviewers (the authors) successfully completed 87 interviews. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to over

an hour with most interviews lasting at least half an hour.

Protocols were initially coded according to prearranged criteria. Many students offered information which we had not foreseen and several of our prearranged response categories were altered.

Results

1. Characteristics and Representativeness of the Sample

The 87 interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 41 with a mean age of 21, modal age of 19 and a median age of 20. Single students composed 91% of the sample and 52% were women. Classes were apportioned as 22% Seniors, 24% Juniors, 26% Sophomores, and 28% Freshmen. Of those interviewed, 31% lived at home with parents, 24% lived in off campus dwellings not with their parents and 45% lived in dormitories. A formal religious affiliation was endorsed by 93% of the students, however substantially fewer attended services regularly. Comparison with University statistics for the entire full-time undergraduate population resulted in no significant differences in proportion married, religious, etc. Nevertheless the sample is somewhat underrepresentative of younger students (over 30% of the population were freshmen) and women (58% were women). Only 33%

of students live in the dormitories, versus the 45% in our sample.

To clarify the situation in which the news (of the crash) was heard, we asked where the respondent was at the time of the crash and whom he was with as well. Most students were at home (38%) or in their dormitory (40%) while substantially fewer were elsewhere on campus (8%) or at work, eating, etc. (14%). Over half of our respondents were with friends (56%) while others were alone (18%), with their family (16%) or with other associates (10%). We also asked students about their prior experience with death and 77% reported the death of at least one person with whom they felt close. Of the 77%, 42% reported two or more previous deaths. Other data demonstrate that the deaths occurred mostly within five years of the disaster and mostly involved persons over 60.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

We ascertained how many people the respondent knew on the plane and how close they were to the person they knew best. We were sensitive to a possible "yea saying" response set and elicited examples of interaction with the mentioned deceased in order to minimize that phenomenon. These data are reported in Figures 3 and 4.

Insert Figures 3 and 4 about here

2. Student Behavior Following News of the Disaster.

On the evening of the crash, many students reported talking with friends, watching television reports and going to the Chapel. A campus wide memorial service in The University Chapel figured prominently in recollections of the next day.

Insert Table 1 and Figure 5 about here

3. Students' Evaluation of Occurrences.

Students were asked what activities on the part of The University were most helpful to their adjustment. As over half of the sample

Insert Table 2 about here

endorsed the memorial service held the next day, we now report more specific data regarding the religious background of our sample. Religion was practiced with at least weekly church attendance by 62% of the sample. Not surprisingly, 80% of the sample reported religious values played a measurable role in their adjustment to the crash and only 9% suggested no role at all. No one reported a weakening of

religious values as 39% reported stronger values and 61% reported no change in values following the tragedy.

Insert Figures 6,7,8 about here

Students' suggestions for University support activities not available following the disaster were relatively sparse except that 17% suggested that school should have been dismissed earlier. Responses to the direct question of should the University have reconvened prior to Christmas elicited divided opinion both in terms of recollected opinion in December and their opinion at the time of the interview.

Insert Figure 9 about here

As well as commenting on the University we asked about their own behavior following the disaster. Fifty-two percent would have done nothing differently and 3 percent stated they should have had more faith in God. Forty-five percent stated that they wished that they had been more involved in fund raising, talks with peers, attendance at events and memorials or at funerals.

4. Data on Student Adjustment

Because our perception was that formal personality

assessment would be intrusive and that one did not have earlier records for comparison, our assessment was based upon student reports and data gathered from various campus student services.

In our interviews students uniformly denied using counseling services or group meetings to assist with their grief process. The counseling center corroberated this evidence as they were impressed with the lack of students requesting services. They report only one student seeking assistance and that student had a close association with one of the deceased. They report group meetings in the dorms were attended by 18-20 people but that these same people traveled from dorm to dorm. Clergy associated with the campus reported some contact with much of it occurring proximate to the time of the accident. It appears that at maximum 50 to 100 students sought formally identified counseling services.

We probed in the interviews for evidence of denial or other maladaptive adjustment processes. While we were able to obtain several instances of students thinking about the crash, few instances seemed to qualify as intrusive in the manner one might consider truly disruptive. (Horowitz, 1976).

Insert Table 3 about here

For instance, the reports "from nowhere" were commonly reported as instances of fleeting thoughts put readily out of mind. "Dreams" fell into two categories. A few nightmares occurred within a day or two after the crash. One included a loved one scheduled to make an air trip, for instance. Most of the dreams could be classed as integrations in that they involved a synthesis of the pre and post disaster realities. One dream was a vision of the campus where every other person was attired in a white "medical" outfit. Students did not report these dreams as lacking affect, at the same time they did not seem to perceive them as unusual or indicative of pa hology.

A final source of information regarding adjustment was the health center. The subjective report was that although the staff was ready with tranquilizing medication, they did not perceive that need to materialize. Inspection of data reflecting average per day use of the health center for two years prior to the year of the disaster, the year after, and the actual year of the disaster are reported in Figure 1. Particularly note figures for January and May.

Insert Figure 10

Discussion

The disaster research literature has been growing rapidly in the past decade and, in fact, we have witnessed the development of at least two major research centers at the University of Colorado and at The Ohio State University devoted to the study of this phenomenon. The literature has developed from merely descriptive studies to the development of substantial models attempting to explain and predict behavior. However, for a number of reasons it is difficult to place the present study in the same context as the majority of disaster studies.

The major difference is that virtually all disaster studies deal with natural disasters. The plane crash involved in this study represents in some way either mechanical failure or human error. We feel that there is a real qualitative difference between the two types of disasters. Natural disasters often involve great amounts of property damage leaving persons homeless or otherwise unable to take care of themselves because of collapsed social and economic systems. Whole communities are often thrown into disarray. These characteristics were absent in the disaster that is the focus of this study. Thus, crucial components of many models such as warning, preparation for impact,

protecting against continuing threat, and restoration of community services are not pertinent to the present discussion. (Dynes, 1974) Hence the major task was not to use individuals to rebuild the community and mourn the loss, but rather to utilize the community to help people cope with the deaths of the individuals involved. The experience in fact may be appropriately conceptualized as an arithmetically expanded version of the more usual family death ritual. (Feifel, 1977)

While many socio-environmental factors appeared important for adjustment, two must be singled out as having extraordinary importance, the role of peers and the role of religion. The nature of these two factors also reflects the personal nature of the adjustment process.

Students reported that one of the most useful things that they did was to talk with friends about the crash and their feelings as they watched TV news reports. Keeping the main thrust of personal interaction within a small already intimate group may have been a major contributor to the seemingly good adjustment made by most of the students. Barton's analysis of "Communities in Disaster" (1969) suggests that the involvement of larger systems actually raises the probability of confusion. In short, the greater

the number of people and institutions involved the greater the likelihood of role conflict, miscommunication and inappropriate role enactment. The role of friends in college has similar role requirements to those necessary for successfully working out grief... College friendships tend to be marked by empathy, understanding and acceptance. (Newman & Newman, 1979). While many students did contact their families shortly after hearing about the disaster it was also clear that friends played a pivotal role the night of the crash and during the following days. Friends appear to have been useful for reaching an understanding of their immediate feelings and attaining social validation for their own behavior.

As stated above, religion emerged as the other important factor in the coping process. Judging from the responses of the subjects we would speculate that religion served to alleviate feelings of helplessness and to answer the more philosophical questions of why did the crash have to occur here, why to these particular students, (and perhaps most importantly to the students) why to individuals so young, etc.?

As reported earlier in the paper most of the subjects reported being members of some church even though their

present level of attendance was not particularly high. In short virtually all of the subjects had a religious background. Alston and Wingrove (1974) in a study examining models of religiosity found that high religiosity tended to be associated with periods of high stress. Their findings tend to substantiate the notion that religion can be a tremendous psychological safety valve. Many students reported praying to the souls of the dead students while others reported praying for family and friends. In either case they felt they were making positive contributions. Clearly some students felt activity such as a blood drive better served this function. Many students also sought solace in the peaceful surroundings of the University Chapel which most must pass each day on their way from the parking lots or dormitories to their classes.

The memorial service was listed by most students as being the single most helpful activity. Its effects were probably both religious and secular. Much theraputic value was no doubt derived from seeing hundreds of other students who felt much the same grief thus allowing one to feel a sense of community and to put one's own losses and feelings in perspective. However, we feel that the location of the service, the University Chapel, was also instrumental in

making the service effective as a coping method. Memorial services held elsewhere could dissolve into pandemonium. However, within the Chapel setting under the guidance of clergy there are norms of conduct for the outpouring of grief in a controlled, time tested manner.

A disaster of the proportions of the plane crash could very easily have long term, deleterious effects of the personalities of younger persons often still in the process of identity formation. That there was a great deal of immediate stress is quite clear both from the interview observation and indirectly from health center data which show a sharp increase in the utilization of health services during the weeks following the crash and at anniversary periods. Over a year after the crash no long term serious effects have become evident. We feel that this is due largely to a social structure which fortunately existed at the University. Because of the size of the University, its religious student body and the natural communication links already in place, many factors necessary for successful coping existed naturally and did not have to be artificially introduced at the time of the crash.

Based on our study, informal perceptions gained in the course of the interviews and observations shared in

telephone conversations with our colleagues at Marshall University we have one basic recommendation to make. The vast majority of students reported feelings of general confusion as to what was appropriate and inappropriate behavior in the situation. Because of this we feel that it is imperative that institutions provide a wide range of activities in which students might voluntarily choose to participate. If at all possible these alternatives should be based on existing activities and facilities. We feel that the satisfactory adjustment made by our subjects was due in large part to the fact that the University provided a range of activities that were comfortable, appealing and known to the students.

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3. Feifel, Herman., New Meanings of Death, McGraw Hill Book Company, 1977.
4. Horowitz, M.J., Stress Response Syndromes, New York: Aronson, Inc., 1976.
5. Newman, B.M. and Newman, P. R., An Introduction to the Psychology of Adolescence, Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1979.
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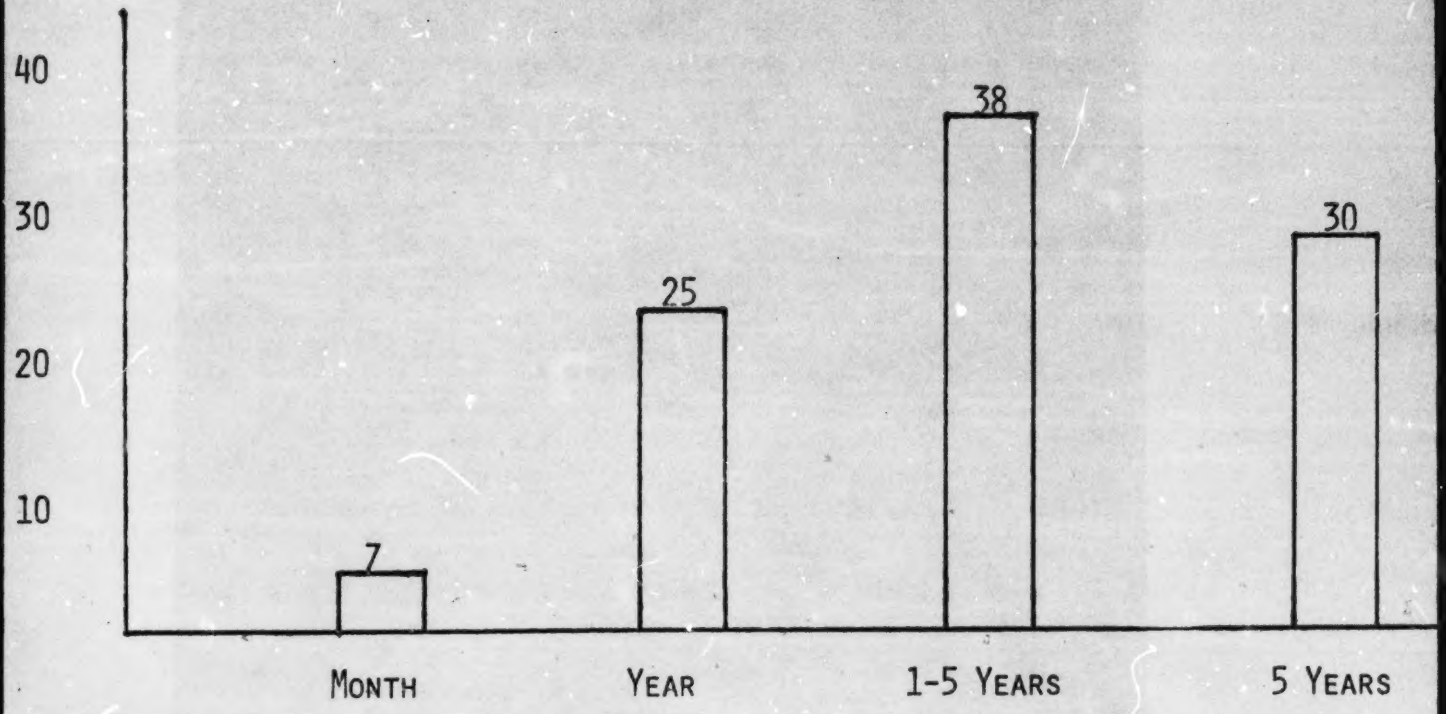
FIGURE 1

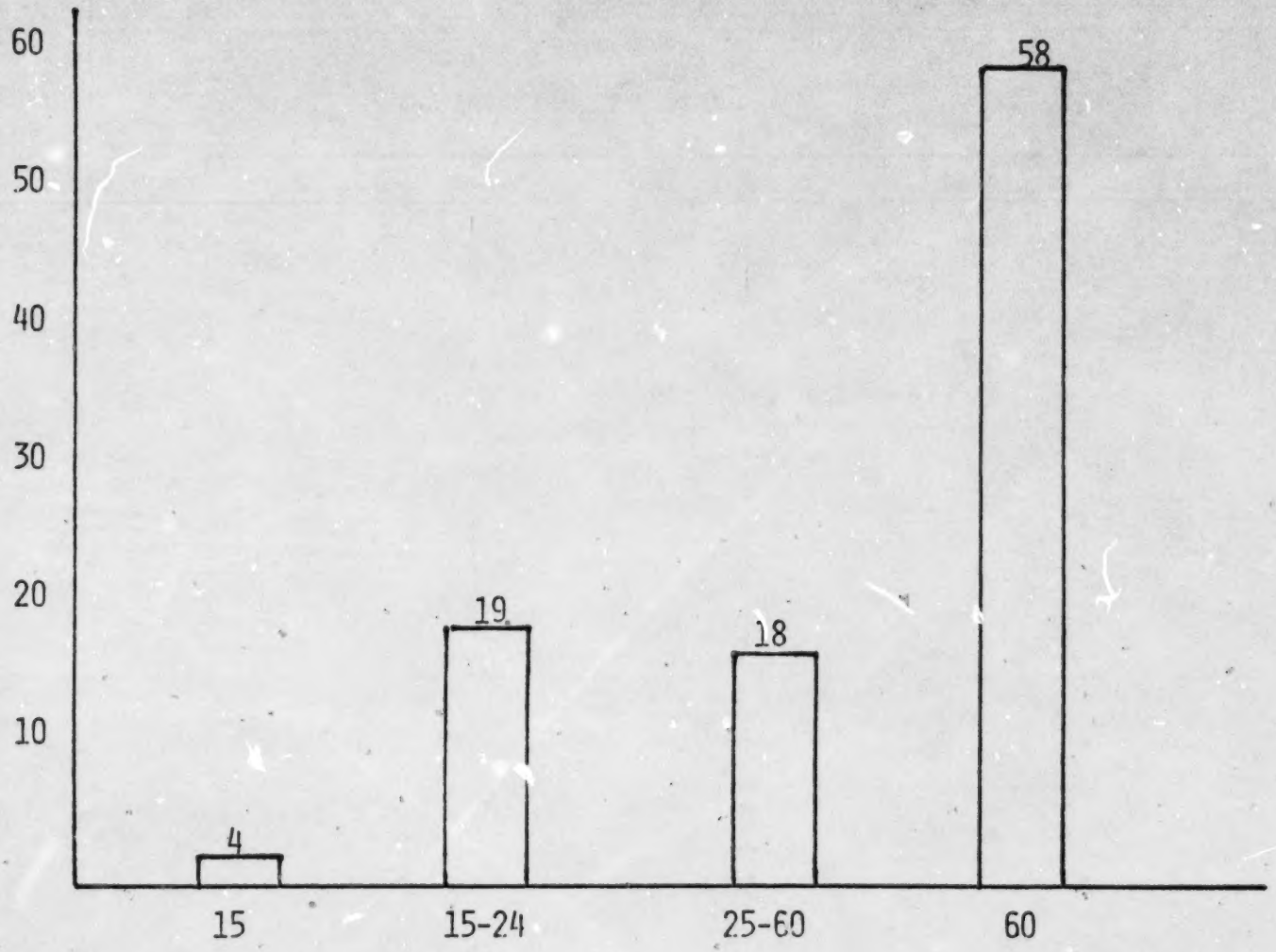
TIME OF MOST RECENTLY EXPERIENCED DEATH



PERCENTAGE OF N = 67

FIGURE 2

REPORTED AGE OF MOST RECENTLY DECEASED

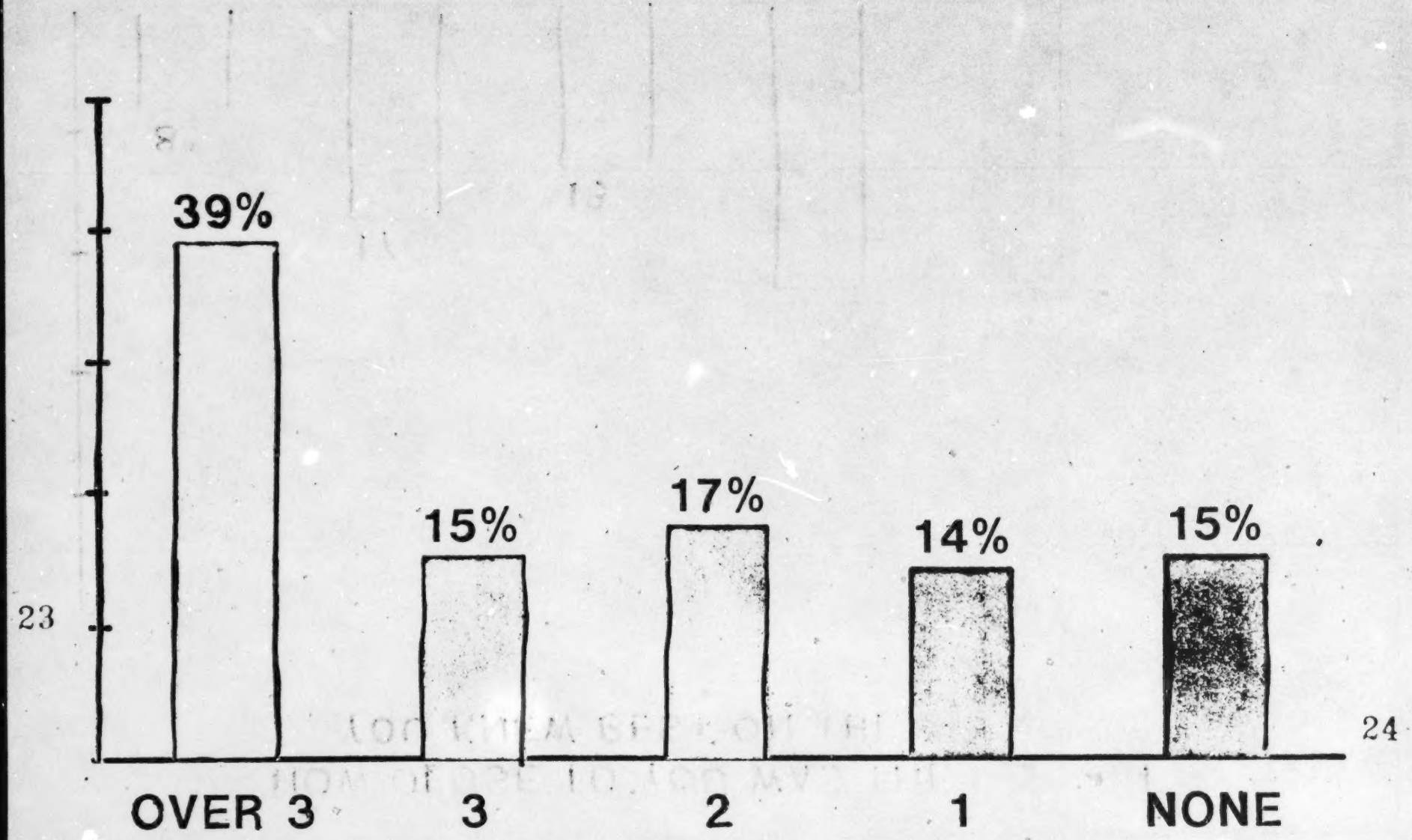


PERCENTAGE OF

N = 67

FIGURE 3

HOW MANY PEOPLE ON THE AIRPLANE DID YOU KNOW?



23

24

FIGURE 4

HOW CLOSE TO YOU WAS THE PERSON YOU KNEW BEST ON THE PLANE?

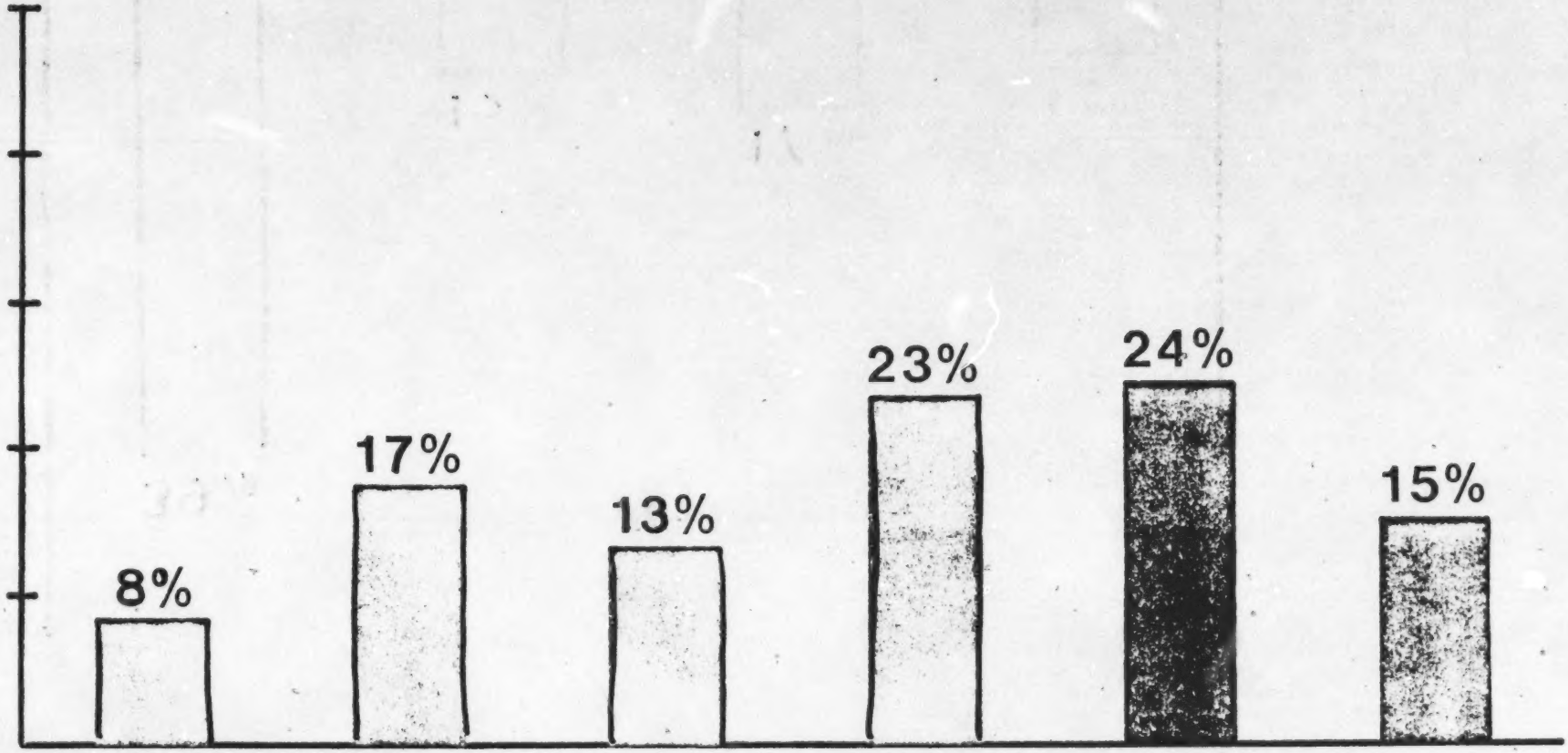


FIGURE 5

FREQUENCY OF MOST PROMINENT ACTIVITY FOLLOWING DAY

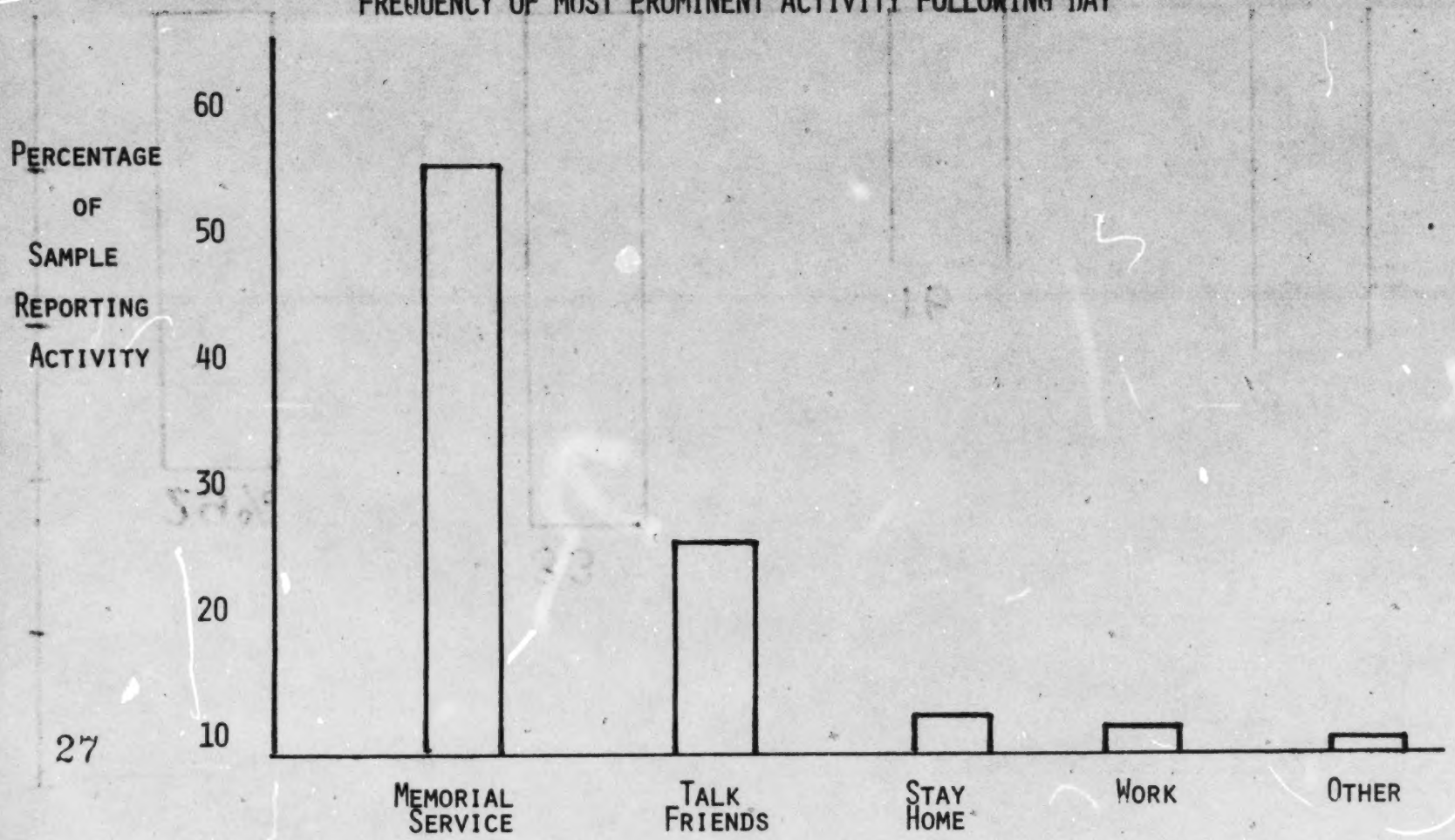


FIGURE 6

DEGREE RELIGION PRACTICED

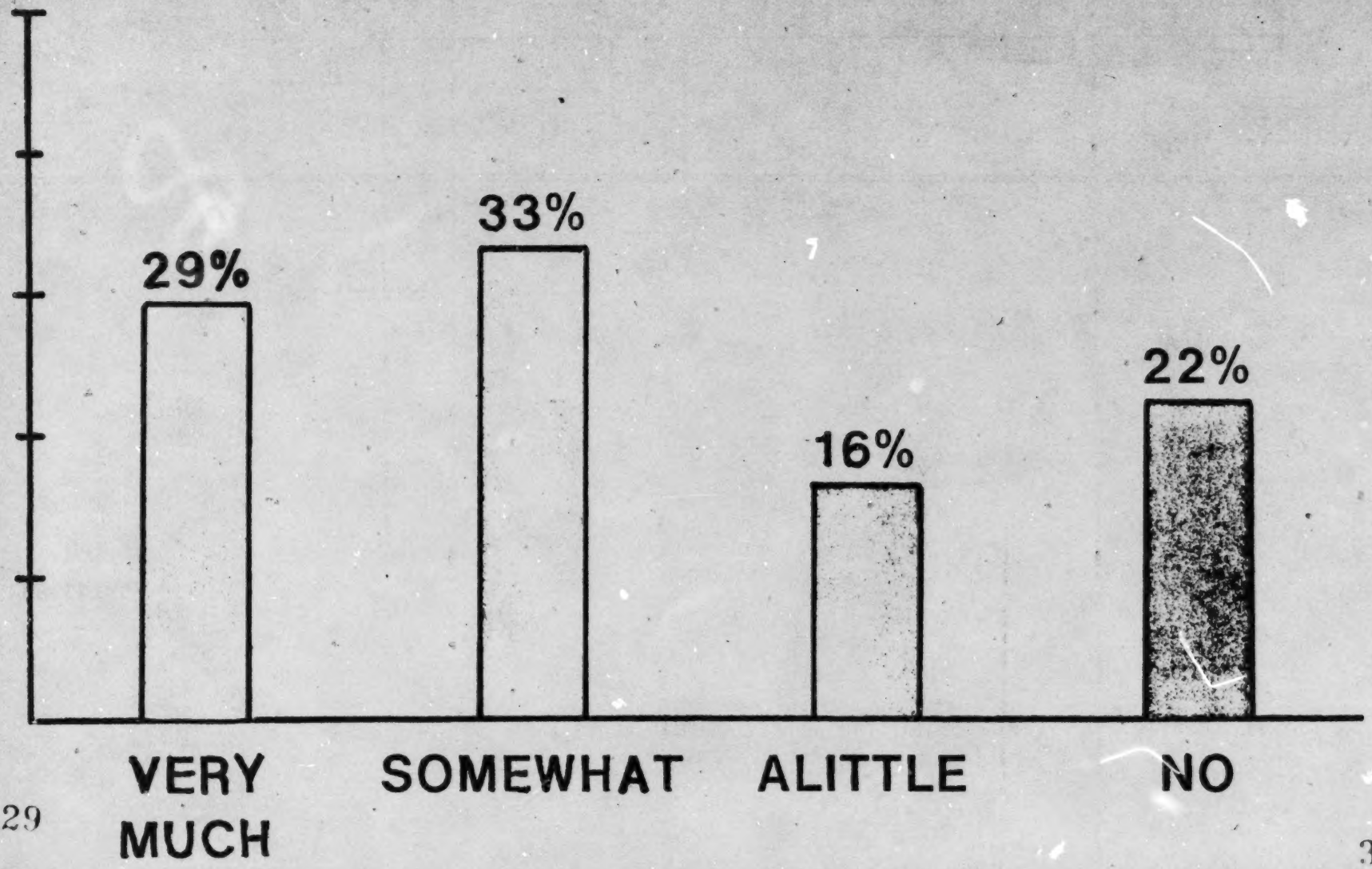


FIGURE 7

DEGREE RELIGIOUS VALUES INVOLVED

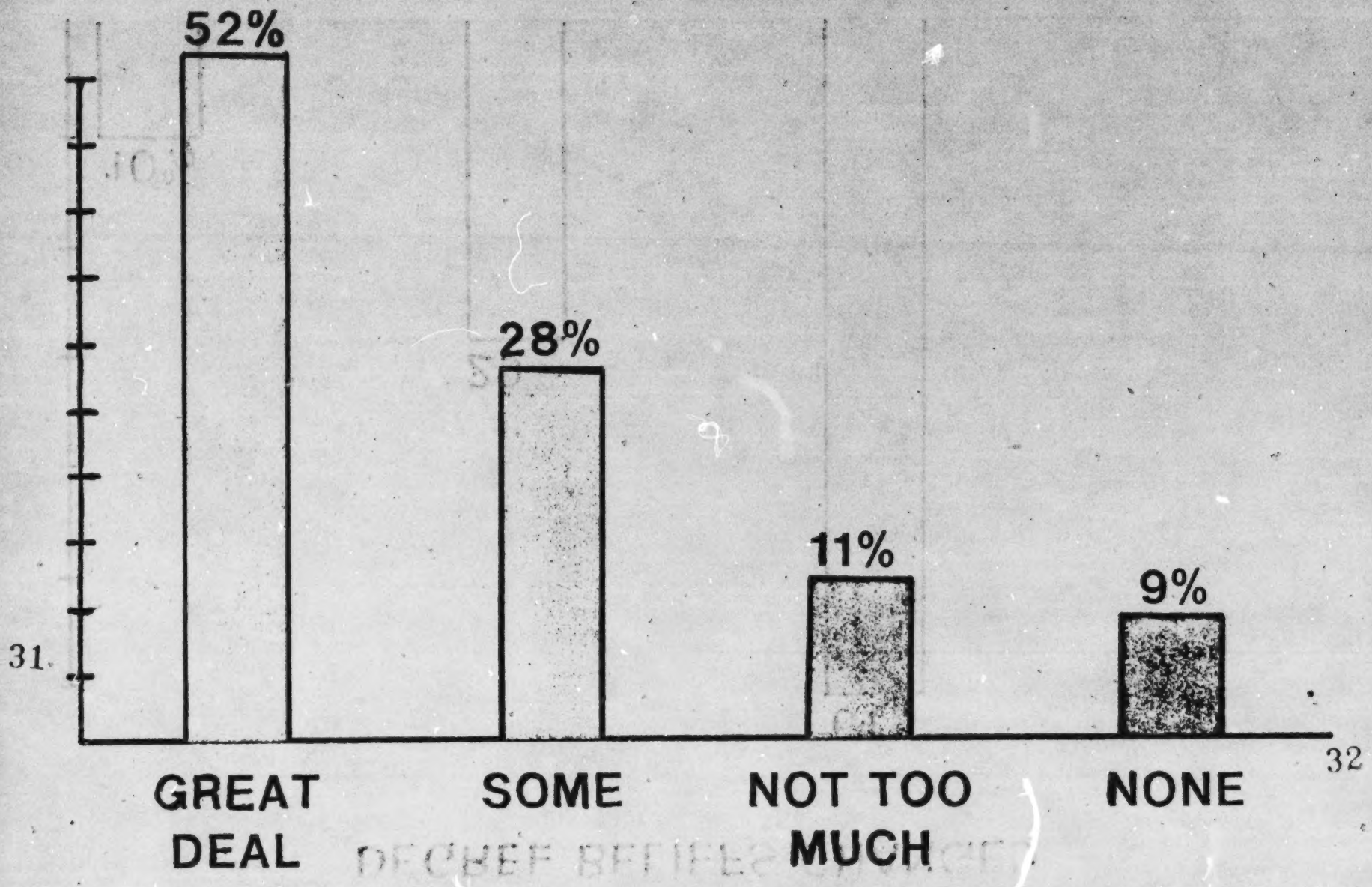


FIGURE 8

DEGREE BELIEFS CHANGED

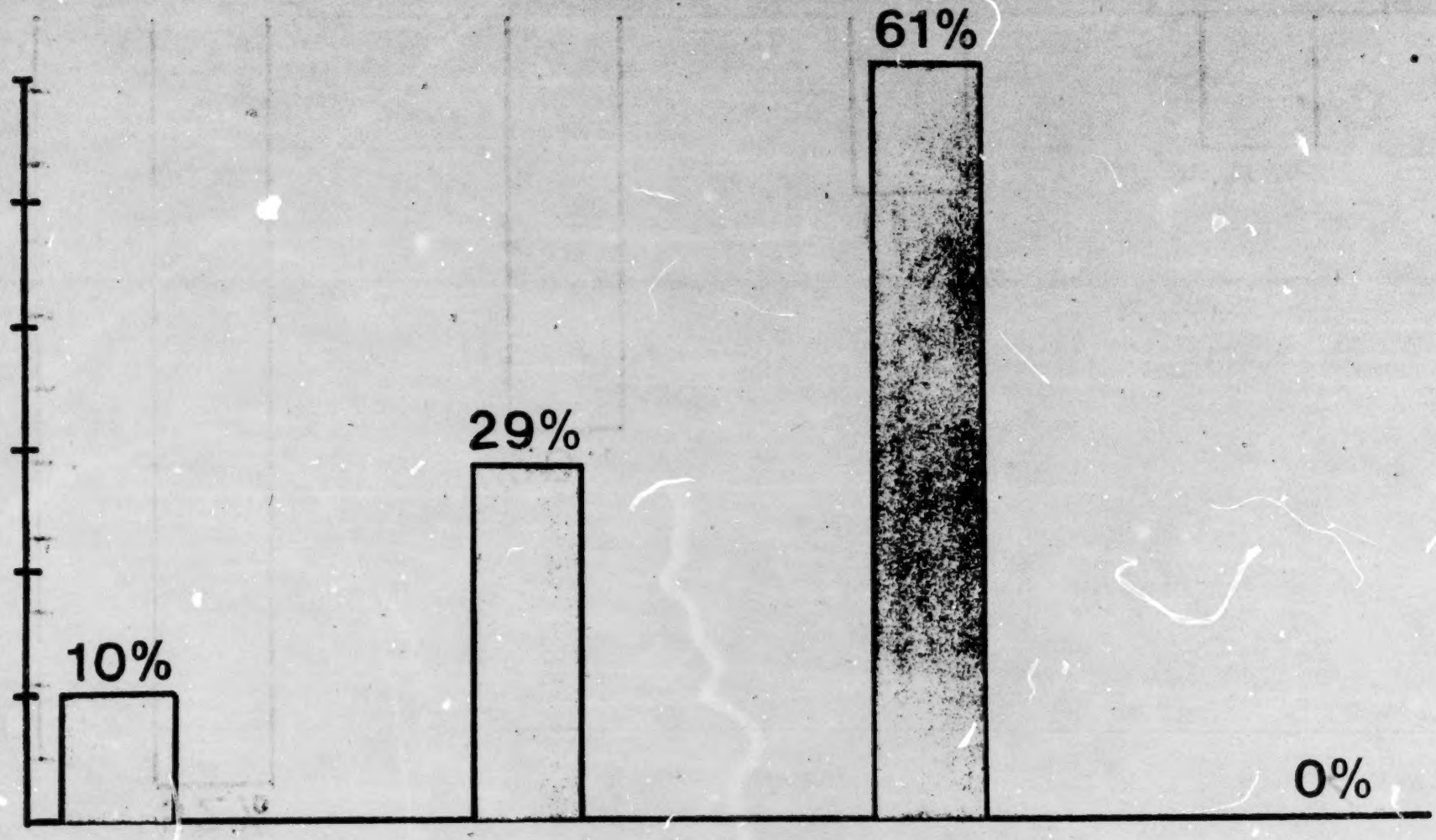


FIGURE 9.

OPINION OF RECONVENING CLASSES
AT TIME OF TRAGEDY AND 3 MONTHS LATER

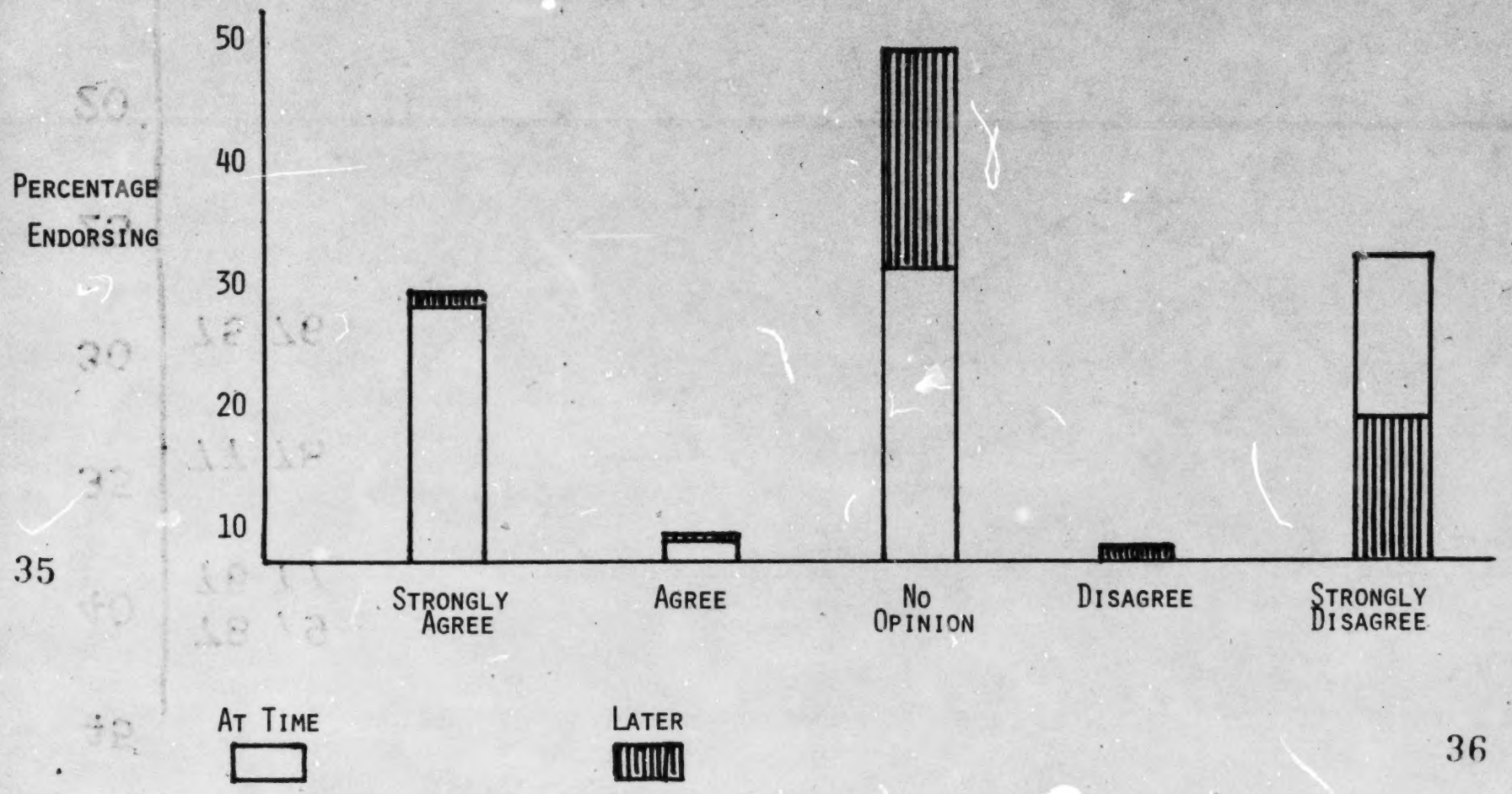
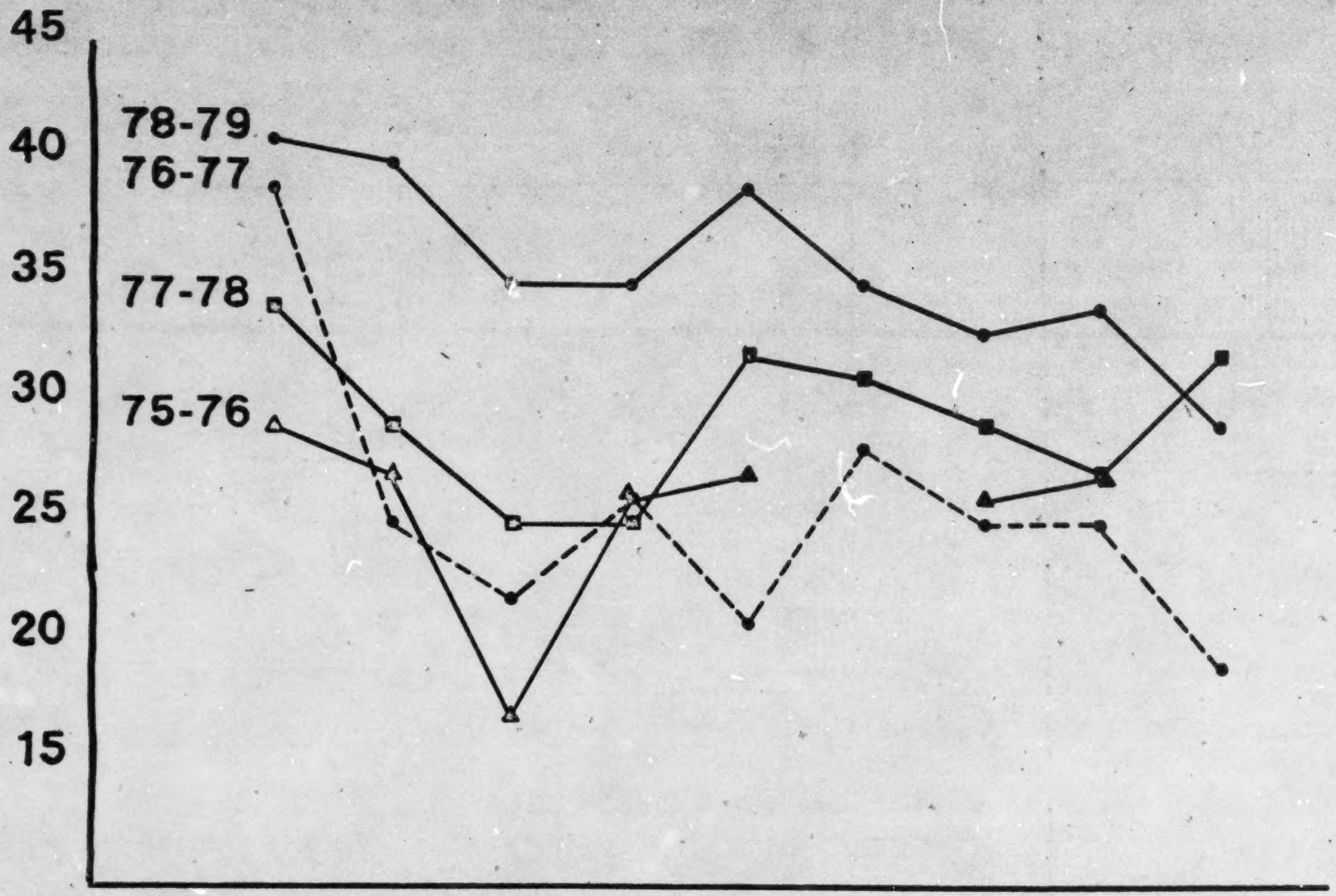


FIGURE 10

VISITS TO HEALTH CENTER



ON CAMPUS STUDENTS (PER DAY)

TABLE 1

REPORTED ACTIVITIES ON THE EVENING OF THE CRASH

TALKED WITH FRIENDS	47
WATCHED NEWS	40
WENT TO CHAPEL	32
STAYED HOME	16
WENT TO MORGUE	9
PRAYED	5
WENT TO AIRPORT	2
LONG WALK	2

TABLE 2

WHAT ACTIVITIES WERE HELPFUL FOR YOUR ADJUSTMENT?

ACTIVITY	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	OVERALL MENTION
MEMORIAL SERVICE	45	6	3	54
CALL OFF CLASS	9	15	2	26
DISCUSS IN CLASS	6	10	7	23
MEMORIAL FUND	2	3	4	9
BLOOD DRIVE	3	5	0	8
NEWMAN CENTER	2	3	2	7
GREEKS	1	1	1	3
$ FOR PARENTS	0	1	0	1
DON'T KNOW	19	44	68	-

TABLE 3

WHEN DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE DISASTER?

PEOPLE ASK	33
NEVER	32
FROM NOWHERE	23
BASKETBALL GAMES	18
NEWSPAPER	17
DREAMS	10
AIRPORTS	6
T.V. WORD TAPE	2
TALL PEOPLE	1